

# **Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan in 2005: A Test of Democracy for the People and the Political Elite as well as for the West**

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## **Executive Summary**

The parliamentary elections held in Azerbaijan last November were the political highlight of the year 2005 in the former Soviet republic. The event was observed by the West with some interest, Azerbaijan being generally regarded as that post-communist country whose path to democracy appears particularly rocky, a country where the president, who is elected every five years, possesses enormous power, while parliament is extremely weak.

Authoritarianism solidified in Azerbaijan particularly after the presidential elections of 2003. There is no separation of powers, the judiciary is controlled by the executive branch, and the police habitually in-fringe fundamental civic rights. While Azerbaijan was downgraded from 'partly free' to 'not free' in the Freedom House Report of 2004, the opposition talks of 'controlled democracy' and of 'semi-authoritarianism, sultan-style'. Only the ruling party itself occasionally describes the country as a 'young democracy'.

In an autocracy, elections are not about political power, being themselves nothing but a facade to legitimise and formally extend the life of the regime. The same holds true for Azerbaijan. In 1991, after independence, a multi-party system as well as freedom of opinion had begun to take root, but the war with Armenia about Nagorni Karabach, combined with a dearth of cadres, caused the democratic approach to fail.

When the former first secretary of the central committee of the Azerbaijani communist party, Haidar Aliyev, returned to power in 1993, the centralization of governmental power flourished, and an exuberant personality cult began to grow up around the new strong man. Aliyev, who had himself confirmed in office in the controversial elections of 1998, came to the end of his era only when he fell sick in the run-up to the recent elections, raising concerns about the possible establishment of a dynasty when he pushed through the candidacy of his son, Ilham Aliyev.

The opposition forces formed two blocks to participate in the elections of November 6, 2005. The three big parties, Equality, Popular Front of Azerbaijan, and Democratic Party of Azerbaijan, formed the Freedom Alliance, while the New Politics group was mainly a gathering of well-known opponents of the regime, such as the first president of Azerbaijan after independence. While the big parties were and are secular and pro-western by inclination, the smaller Social Democratic Party of Azerbaijan as well as the government-friendly Communist Party of Azerbaijan lean towards Russia. At the same time, the four big opposition parties as well as the ruling party, New Azerbaijan, are remarkable for their nationalist rhetoric. While the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan is pro-Iran, the smaller Islamic Democratic Party shows a face to the

world that is both Islamic and modern. The National Democratic Party, on the other hand, is ultra-nationalist in character.

The day of the polls itself remained basically peaceful, although the international observer mission's preliminary report stated that the elections had not been conformable with international standards.

In point of fact, the opposition suffered a crushing defeat: Out of a total of 115 parliamentary mandates that were confirmed, 56 went to the president's party, 40 to independent candidates, and three to the government-friendly Fatherland Party. The opposition won no more than 16 seats in total. However, since the so-called independents must be regarded as yes-men of the ruling party, even the newly-elected parliament is anything but capable of controlling the executive branch, as would be normal in a system of checks and balances.

There are several reasons why the importance of the recent elections was greater than that of its predecessors. To begin with, the West was paying more attention than before to elections in the CIS region, correspondingly boosting the expectations of the opposition. Then, the elections were the first to take place after Haidar Aliyev had handed over power to his son. Furthermore, George W. Bush spoke about freedom for the entire region when he visited Georgia in 2005. Finally, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe emphasized the importance of elections for democracy in Azerbaijan early in 2005.

Officially, the turnout was 42.2 percent. As vote rigging is suspected, however, the number of votes cast was probably even lower, and with good reason: On the one hand, the citizens of Azerbaijan have by now lost their trust in politics. On the other, the demand for democracy and freedom is very low among a population that appears frozen in fatalism, submission, and fear. An opinion poll revealed that no more than 11 percent of respondents thought that implementing democratic reforms was one of the key duties of the government. And indeed, the Azerbaijanis' perception of democracy is somewhat capricious: Democracy, in their opinion, mainly means freedom to go beyond the limits of what is morally admissible. Two socio-cultural characteristics may help to explain why this should be so: A lack of individualism, reinforced by a feeling of social and moral obligation towards one's personal environment, and a lack of civic awareness.

As before, the government failed to make good its promise that elections would be democratic this time around, whereas the opposition was unable to prevent rigging. This failure, in turn, is rooted in several factors: The opposition parties were unable either to agree on a common candidate or to form an election alliance. Furthermore, their own lack of internal democracy kept them from establishing themselves as a realistic alternative to the ruling regime, building their own ideological foundations, and presenting strategic goals that the citizens could understand. The observers' judgements varied considerably.

Russia, Iran, and the CIS observer commission saw the elections in a positive light, while the US viewed them as moderately negative. Open criticism was heard only from the OSCE and the Council of Europe. However, Washington's vagueness was not without its consequences. When the US embassy in Baku announced its intention to cooperate closely with the newly-elected parliament in December 2005, after the result of the elections had been recognized, the opposition parties in

Azerbaijan charged the US with applying double standards. They even called for breaking off contacts with the embassies of those countries that had recognized the elections. The question that remains to be asked is whether the domino effect of the 'colour revolutions' in the CIS region is flagging, or a new logic is being dictated by the interests of the West in Azerbaijan.

There may be good reasons for the West's wait-and-see attitude. Situated between Russia and Iran, and rich in oil and gas in its own right, Azerbaijan is the gateway to the Central Asian region that is believed to harbour enormous energy resources. At the moment, the West would be seriously discommoded by any power struggles that might endanger the country's stability within its sensitive environment. Finally, Azerbaijan is of great strategic value to the US in its war against terrorism. As far as the democratization of Azerbaijan is concerned, the West now appears to rely on evolution, i.e. on a roundabout approach to democracy via civil society. Whether or not this will turn out right in the end remains to be seen.

Azerbaijan never saw democratic elections after independence in 1991, and even the recent elections of 2005 returned a parliament whose composition indicates that it will be hardly more than a government clique or, as the opposition puts it, a notary public attached to the president's office.

There are many reasons why no democratic revolution ever happened in Azerbaijan: The ruling elite presents a common front that shows no trace of fragmentation. The ruling regime is markedly more authoritarian than elsewhere within the CIS: Apparently, the oil business and democracy do not go well together, and thus cannot grow together. The complexities of the international environment, induced mainly by the great powers pursuing their own oil interests in their own 'great game', does not really favour Azerbaijan's natural development towards democracy. Fragmented in many ways, the opposition in the country is politically weak. Finally, the Azerbaijani nation itself hardly shows any glimmerings of democratic awareness. The question of whether Azerbaijan will be capable – and worthy – of democracy within the foreseeable future can only be answered in a pessimistic vein at the moment, given the present circumstances.